



Disability
Rights
Oregon

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9 of the 10 people who died in Oregon jails last year had a disability

Many individuals were not healthy enough to be in jail, many deaths were preventable

Portland, Oregon—Today, Oregon’s leading statewide disability rights organization revealed that most of the people who died in Oregon jails last year had a disability. An investigative report released today by Disability Rights Oregon (DRO) shed light, for the first time, on the causes that contributed to the deaths of 10 individuals in jails in Clatsop, Deschutes, Jackson, Klamath, Marion, and Polk counties, as well as the Springfield Municipal Jail and the NORCOR detention center in The Dalles.

As the jail population plummeted last year in response to the threat of COVID-19, the number of deaths in Oregon jails rose. Jails are shielded from public scrutiny like few other places in society. DRO’s investigation documents the systemic failures—by both hospitals and jails—that led to this tragic loss of human life, and makes clear that many, if not most, of deaths that occurred in Oregon jails were preventable.

The report found that the deaths were a result of the following:

- Jails use of restraint practices banned in clinical settings.
- Jails inadequately assess medical conditions.
- Jails are unable to provide necessary treatment.
- Jails failed to take measures to prevent suicide, even when detainees presented with known risks of suicide.
- Oregon lacks meaningful transparency and oversight of jail safety and healthcare, and
- Detainees cycle in and out of jail due to the lack of community treatment options.

“As a community, we need to be able to quickly connect people with mental illness to treatment when they need it to avoid arrests and triggering the criminal justice process. Timely access to care benefits the individual in crisis and helps the whole community use its resources more effectively,” said Clatsop County Sheriff Matt Phillips. “Smaller, rural communities in particular lack sufficient mental health services. Greater investments in local mental healthcare will result in fewer arrests and make our communities stronger. People with mental illness should have their most basic healthcare needs met in the community.”

“People with disabilities are dying in Oregon jails because they needed healthcare, but couldn’t find it in the community and didn’t get it in jail either. This report bears witness to a human rights catastrophe. It stems from our failure to build a strong community healthcare program for people with mental illness. Remediating this is a civil rights issue whose time has come,” said Jake Cornett, Executive Director of Disability Rights Oregon.

Recommendations

DRO’s investigation found both common failures and common solutions endorsed by a broad consensus of stakeholders. The report includes a blueprint with clear next steps to reduce the criminalization of people with disabilities and their preventable death. DRO’s recommendations include:

- Produce adequate healthcare standards and effective suicide protocols for Oregon jails
- Strengthen jail oversight and
- Prevent the criminalization and improper incarceration of people with disabilities.

The report, [Grave Consequences: How the Criminalization of Disability Leads to Deaths in Jail](#), is available at www.droregon.org.

Additional Resources

- [The ‘Unwanted’: Looking for Help, Landing in Jail](#) (Spring 2019)
- [Video: Decriminalize Mental Illness](#) (2019)
- [One Year After ‘A Merry Go Round that Never Stops’](#) (May 2018)
- [A Merry Go Round that Never Stops: Mental Illness in the Multnomah County Detention Center](#) (March 2017)

About Disability Rights Oregon

Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For more than 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon's Protection & Advocacy system.

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